

Under Pressure: Strategies for Reducing and Preventing Stress Incontinence

Many people, particularly women, and increasingly with age, experience urinary stress incontinence. As many as 1 in 5 women over the age of 40 will experience it. However, it is also happens to younger, active women. Studies have reported that up to 47% of physically active women experience this problem at some time. In this article, we're going to look at why it happens and what you can do to stop it happening. There is also an associated exercise leaflet.

Stress incontinence is the leakage of urine during physically stressful activities. These activities could be as simple as coughing, lifting, or carrying parcels and even laughing or sneezing. It is also common in sports that involve jogging, jumping, running, lifting weights, aerobics and during abdominal exercises. Common or not, it doesn't make it any less comfortable or embarrassing and studies have shown that women will change their physical activity or sport, or even stop exercising all together.

WHY DOES IT HAPPEN?

The pelvic floor muscles are the firm, supportive muscles that stretch from your pubic bone at the front of your pelvis, to the base of your spine at the back. The pelvic floor muscles work as a sling or hammock, and help to hold your bladder, uterus and bowel in place. Those muscles also close your bladder outlet and rectal passage. When your pelvic floor muscles are well-toned they stop leakage of urine from your bladder and accidental passing of wind. When you go to the toilet, the pelvic floor muscles relax, once empty they tighten to restore control. These muscles actively squeeze when you laugh or cough, to avoid leaking.

Stress incontinence happens when there is sudden extra pressure, with weak pelvic floor muscles that can't withstand this added pressure, or maintain bladder closure. In this

case a small (or sometimes larger) amount of urine is leaked.

CAUSES OF MUSCLE WEAKNESS

- Childbirth, a vaginal delivery can cause trauma to the pelvic floor muscles or the nerves supplying the muscles
- Lack of exercise, poor muscle tone
- Changing hormone levels in pregnancy and menopause
- Long term history of constipation
- Chronic cough or chest problems
- Being overweight, obese, high BMI
- Certain sports, for example, running and jogging
- Performing abdominal exercises incorrectly
- Incorrect lifting techniques

For a woman who doesn't have other significant factors that may cause stress incontinence, such as nerve dysfunction or bladder infection, research has shown that pelvic floor exercises are very effective in treating stress incontinence. These exercises include "Kegel Exercises."

KEGEL EXERCISES

The best way to experience what this exercise should feel like is to stop the flow of urine while urinating. That will contract the muscles that you should be exercising. The muscles around your vagina and anus should be contracted with the feeling that they are being lifted "up and in". Once you have that sensation, practice the contractions when you're not urinating. Exercising your pelvic floor should not show at all 'on the outside.' It is important that you should not pull in your tummy, or tighten your buttocks.

There are two types of Kegel Exercises, slow (endurance) and fast:

Slow

- Tighten, pulling up and in
- Hold tight for as long as you can (up to ten seconds)
- Rest for four seconds
- Repeat the exercise, up to ten times

Fast

- Tighten as before, as quickly as you can, hold for 1 second and relax
- Repeat the exercise up to 10 times
- Use this exercise to tighten your pelvic floor muscle prior to coughing or sneezing or bending over

Repeat both exercises at least 4 times a day. This sounds like a lot but if you consciously plan to build the sets into your daily routine it can be done easily – for example do a set each time you are standing waiting for the kettle to boil, brushing your teeth, waiting at the bus stop, sitting on the train or at a red traffic light.

EXERCISE THERAPY

Kegel exercises alone are not enough. Working the muscles around the entire pelvic area and core, including your transversus abdominus, have shown to aid the contraction of the pelvic floor muscles. So, strengthening those muscles may also help improve your symptoms. Your health practitioner can help with these exercises. Other treatments by health practitioners can also include the use of vaginal cones and electrical stimulation to improve muscle tone in the pelvic floor. Pilates is another excellent exercise therapy that will work your core abdominal muscles, pelvis, lower back and pelvic floor and improve bladder control.

Don't let this be a sensitive or embarrassing health issue, affecting your social and personal life, as well as your ability to participate in sports. The sooner you act, the better the outcome.



UNDER PRESSURE: STRATEGIES FOR REDUCING AND PREVENTING STRESS INCONTINENCE

YOUR EXERCISE PROGRAMME

This programme has specific exercises for stress incontinence. They are designed to strengthen the deep core muscles that work together with your pelvic floor muscles. These exercises should be done at least once a day, preferably twice a day, time-permitting, along with the Kegel exercises done regularly throughout your day. It is important to ensure the exercises are performed with good technique and good postural control. Make sure to repeat the same number of exercises on both sides (where applicable). We have given suggested sets and repetitions. Remember everyone is different so your therapist may

give guidance that is more specific to you.

WARM UP AND COOL DOWN

It is important to warm up (unless advised otherwise by your practitioner) with a brisk walk or a gentle jog for 5-10 minutes before you start your exercises. This increases your circulation and helps prepare the muscles for the activity to come. When you have finished your exercises, end the session with a 5 minute gentle walk or slow jog to allow your heart rate to slow down gradually.

SUPINE BRIDGE BASIC

Lie flat on your back, with your knees bent, squeeze your bottom muscles and lift your body upwards. Keep your arms by your side and use them to help you balance. Make sure you maintain good posture (do not over-arch your lower back) and contract the deep abdominal muscles by squeezing your tummy towards your spine. This exercise helps to strengthen the abdominal, lower back, gluteal and hamstring muscles. You can progress this by straightening one leg/knee alternately.

Repeat 10 times | Hold for 10 seconds

 **Video:**
http://youtu.be/fK_xUE3OKIE



HORSE-STANCE SAME SIDE LIFT

Go on to all fours, and keep good posture. Draw your tummy inwards (towards the ceiling). Lift your hand and same side knee upwards 10-20cm and hold this position. To make the exercise harder, keep your hand and knee closer to the floor. This is an advanced core stability and core control exercise to work the abdominal muscles.

Repeat 10 times | Hold for 5 seconds | Perform both sides

 **Video:**
<http://youtu.be/ITz66Yhq2zo>



PLANK

Rest on your forearms and your toes. Hold this position. Keep good straight posture, and do not let your back arch too much. This is a core strengthening exercise. Try to build up how long you can hold the plank for, then rest and repeat the hold, aiming for 1 minute hold without a rest.

Repeat 5 times | Hold for 10 seconds

 **Video:**
<http://youtu.be/noeBz0JoW-4>



LEG SLIDE

Lie on your back, with both legs straight, activate your deep abdominal muscles by drawing your tummy towards the floor. Slide one heel towards your bottom. Maintain only the slightest contact with your heel on the ground. Keep the leg slide slow and controlled. You can progress the exercise by lifting the opposite leg just a few inches off the ground, while sliding the other heel towards your bottom. This is a great core control exercise to work the abdominal muscles.

Repeat 10 times | Perform both sides

 **Video:**
<http://youtu.be/hi4nb-isyZ8>



HIP ABDUCTION LYING BILATERAL

Lying on your side, flatten your lower back by gently tucking your tummy in. Keeping your legs together, lift your legs several inches in the air. You can either hold this position, or return your legs down and then repeat the exercise.

Ask your therapist which they would prefer you to do. This exercise strengthens the pelvic, gluteal, core and lower back areas.

Repeat 10 times | Hold for 2 seconds | Perform both sides


 **Video:**
<http://youtu.be/6tqLIUqEP0>



2 POINT KNEELING HORIZONTAL

Adopt a 4 point position on your hands and knees. Maintain good posture, and gently contract the deep abdominal muscles by drawing your belly button in (towards your spine). Lift one arm in front of you, and your opposite leg behind you. Then alternate. This exercise strengthens the deep core muscles.

Repeat 10 times | Hold for 5 seconds | Perform both sides

 **Video:**
<http://youtu.be/MAzd-kxnH18>



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